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The Universal Obligation to
CHRISTIAN CHARITY.

A
S E R M O N

Preach'd at
BOW-CHURCH,
On the Second of *March*, 1723.

Before the Honourable
Society of Antient Britons;
Establish'd in Honour of
Her ROYAL HIGHNESS's Birth-Day,
AND THE
Principality of WALES.

By **JOHN PETERS, A. M.** K
Lecturer of St. *Clement-Danes.*

L O N D O N: φ
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TO
His ROYAL HIGHNESS
GEORGE, Prince of Wales,

President of the
Honourable Society of Antient Britons;

AND TO

The Right Honourable the Earl of <i>Sutherland</i> ,	<i>William Owen Esq;</i> <i>Thomas Morgan of Ruper-</i>
The Right Honourable the Lord Viscount <i>Gage</i> ,	<i>ra Esq;</i> <i>Walter Bagenall Esq;</i>
Sir <i>Arthur Owen</i> Bar.	<i>Richard Lloyd Esq;</i>
Sir <i>Nicholas Carew</i> Bar.	<i>James Nasmyth Esq;</i>
<i>William Morgan</i> of <i>Trede-</i> <i>gar Esq;</i>	<i>Thomas Master Esq;</i> <i>Roger Lort Esq;</i>

Stewards of the Society for the Year ensuing.

AND TO

The Right Reverend Father in GOD,
William Lord Bishop of Bangor;

AND TO

Sir *Thomas Jones* Knt. Treasurer and Secretary:

This SERMON is most humbly Dedicated.



ROM. xiv. 16.

*Let not then your Good be evil
spoken of.*



THAT the original End and Institution of this Day's Solemnity is, in its own nature, truly *Pious, Good, and Commendable*, and therefore highly *Acceptable* to Almighty God, is a Truth which, I presume, no one will be so hardy as to deny, who acknowledges the Being of a God, and that he delights in the Religious Worship and Adoration of his Creatures.

THAT the principal Interest and Concern in the Institution of this Festival, upon which

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this Annual Commemoration is founded, and to the Support whereof these two Honourable Societies are thus happily united; what is it? but to promote the Cause of God and Religion, in securing, as far as in them lies, the temporal and eternal Welfare of their Brethren: Whilst at the same time they do justly congratulate the Opportunity that this Day affords them to proclaim their grateful Acknowledgments of the additional Blessing conferr'd upon their Loyal, Antient, and Honourable Principality, in the Auspicious Birth of a PRINCESS, whose many excellent Virtues and Endowments, demand rather to be the Pattern of our Imitation, than the Subject of our Praise.

THAT these have been the only Motives upon which these Societies have hitherto proceeded, and which, I trust in God, will for ever continue to be their great and only Aim and Concern, will sufficiently appear to any Person, whose Curiosity shall lead him to peruse the several Orders and Resolutions that have been from time to time enacted (and to which, a free Access has always been allowed) for the better Support

port and Government of this happy Polity ; together with the many excellent and numerous Effects of Charity, which *never faileth* under a Constitution thus wisely order'd and establish'd.

BUT as the best form'd Societies here on Earth, must necessarily be compounded of many individual Members, Men of different Interests, Prejudices and Passions, the inseparable Infirmities of the Human Nature, which, if encourag'd, must inevitably expose them to frequent Disorders, Jealousies, and Discontents ; and, if not timely corrected, end in the utter Ruin, and Subversion of the Community. For *where envying and strife is, there* (faith the Apostle) *is confusion and every evil work.* What Method, then, can we propose, more effectually conduced towards the utter Extirpation of all Seeds of private Hatred and Animosities amongst us, the very Bane of all Civil Society, than by endeavouring to cultivate and establish in our Hearts the contrary good Dispositions of *lowliness and meekness, of long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace?*

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WHILST our Behaviour towards each other continues to be thus directed, according to this perfect Rule of Gospel-Charity; whilst we diligently observe to regulate our ordinary Conduct and Conversation in Life by it, to the Benefit and Satisfaction both of our selves and others; whilst we make it our Business, our Study and Employment, to sacrifice our Passions, our Prejudices, our Interests, nay, our innocent and lawful Liberties and Enjoyments, to the promoting the publick Interest of the Society, which we engage to support; we may defy the utmost Malice and Contrivance of our Enemies to disturb or weaken our Intentions for the publick Good, whilst we our selves continue firm and united in the Bond of true Christian Charity.

GIVE me Leave, therefore, from the Words of the Apostle in the Text, to recommend the Practice of this Gospel-Duty to your Consideration; a Doctrine, which the Solemnity of the present Season, and the Occasion of this Day's Assembly, do conspire to render highly useful and necessary.

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Let not then your Good be evil spoken of.

I N order to find out the true Measure and Extent of the Rule here given us by the Apostle, I shall consider the Argument in the Context, upon which it is plainly grounded ; and from thence endeavour to prove,

I. THE Universal Obligation and Duty of Christian Charity.

II. I N what particular Instances the Danger of transgressing it, is most likely to happen. And,

III. I shall give some Reasons why it ought never to be transgress'd, when the Transgression of it may, with an ordinary Share of Prudence and Care, be both foreseen and avoided.

I. Then, I am to consider the Apostle's Argument in the Context ; and from thence to prove the Universal Obligation and Duty of Christian Charity.

If

Ver. 15.

If (says he) thy Brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably: destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. This was, indeed, the great and important Consideration that moved him immediately to subjoin these Words, *Let not then your Good be evil spoken of.* As for the evil Speeches of Men, which might at any time be rashly and unjustly thrown out upon those whose Actions and Behaviour in Life did not really deserve them, we can't reasonably believe that the Apostle so regarded them, as to reckon them meerly, upon their own account, necessary to be declin'd, by any Abridgment of the lawful Use of Christian Liberty. He had too well learn'd and practis'd the hard Lesson of *bearing evil report*, as well as *good report*, for the Gospel's sake, to teach others to be cautious of incurring it for its own sake only. But he knew that the Practice of Evil-speaking always did, and would do greater Harm to the Speakers themselves, than to the Persons spoken of; that the Authors of them could not but be guilty of great Rashness and Impiety in the sight of God; that they naturally

rally tended to warm and strengthen Men in their Prejudices against that which is good; and to make them, as on the one hand more and more averse to the receiving of the Truth; so on the other, less capable of judging of it, however skilfully recommended to their Acceptance. These are but some of the evil Consequences which naturally flow from and accompany the Practice of speaking evil of that which is in it self lawful and good: But by the frequent Repetition of the like evil Speeches, it is likewise natural for Men's Passions to be wrought up into a Flame, a burning Heat and Antipathy to the things spoken against; and then they are not to be satisfy'd or appeas'd whilst the Person is near them, (or perhaps so much as in being) that gave the Offence. Now, let the Offence be what it will, tho' never so unjustly taken, which is attended with any of these ill Consequences, can he possibly be innocent and justifiable, that hath unnecessarily given it? Can he be fairly acquitted of the Crime of Uncharitableness, that would not wave his Privilege a little for his Brother's good? That would

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not suspend his saying or doing any thing to a more seasonable and fitting Opportunity, rather than give a present Occasion of Scandal and Offence to a weak or prejudic'd Brother? or that would not use any Care and Endeavour to vary the Mode and Manner either of his Words and Actions, as might equally answer whatever good Ends they tended to; but probably without Offence?

He that despises another's Weakness of Understanding in Religious Matters, and therefore wilfully offends, is both uncharitable and proud. He that is too careless to think so far of those that are about him, as whether they are weak or no, and by that means gives Offence, (not by Design, but through Inadvertency) he is certainly in a less degree culpable; for he ought, in Charity, to have been more wary and circumspect: he must not think that bare Thoughtlessness can be a sufficient Excuse for the Scandal or Offence he hath given. Our Apostle expressly warns us against this kind of Thoughtlessness, saying, *Take heed, lest by any means your liberty become a stumbling-block to them that are weak:* With much more to

to Christian Charity.

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the like Purpose in other Places of his Epistles: As particularly, where he speaks thus,

All things are lawful for me, but all things ^{1 Cor. x.}

are not expedient. All things are lawful for ^{23, 24.}

me, but all things edify not. Let no Man seek his own, but every Man his Brother's Wealth.

Which Words do, of themselves, amply demonstrate that the great Reason of his advising Men to be cautious in the Use of their, otherwise lawful, Christian Liberty, and for his being so himself, was not for the Prevention of Censure, and the Obloquy of evil Tongues, consider'd in it self as an Evil; too apt, indeed, to create Uneasiness in the Minds of those, upon whom it is unjustly thrown; but for Charity-sake, that no Hindrance or Impediment to the Means of Edification between Man and Man may unnecessarily be put in the way, by an indiscreet Use of Liberty. The only Christian Duty that we can offend against, by a too negligent and unguarded Use of lawful Liberty, is, that of Charity towards our Neighbours; which obliges us to have a constant Care and Concern for their spiritual Welfare, above all things; and to say

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and do what we can to their Edification that way ; and to be strictly cautious, if it be not in our power to advance and forward that, to be sure, at least, not to prejudice or obstruct it, *by putting a Stumbling-block, or an Occasion to fall, in our Brother's way* ; as the Apostle speaks in the 14th Chapter of his Epistle to the *Romans*, and at the 13th Verse : But that (as he says again) *All our things be done with Charity*. From what has been now said, we may, and ought to conclude, that our Apostle had an Eye to Christian-Liberty in general, even in the very utmost Extent of it, when he gave the Rule in my Text, *Let not then your Good be evil spoken of* : And that he intended no less, than entirely to circumscribe the Use and Exercise of that Liberty within the Boundaries of **Charity**.

II. **L** E T us go on, therefore, in the next place, to see in what particular Instances the Danger of transgressing this is most likely to happen ; that is, in other Words, How, in the common Offices and Duties of Life, and in our ordinary **Conversation** and **De-**

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portment one with another, we may easily misuse even our good and lawful Liberty, to the spiritual Harm and Detriment of our weaker Brethren; and consequently, to the greater or less Violation of the Duty of Christian Charity: of which, whosoever is at any time wilfully guilty, he shall, undoubtedly, be one Day made to account for it before Almighty God.

Many, very many, amongst us, are too apt to offend, or do very considerable Prejudice to one another, and the common Interest of Religion, by entirely neglecting ever to season their Discourse and Conversation with Words of Piety and Goodness: Nay, by discovering, when any religious Topick is casually advanc'd in Conversation, such a Coldness in themselves towards it; such a Backwardness to the encouraging of it; such apparent Signs of Uneasiness till it be dropped, or otherwise made an end of; that if the greatest Libertine in the World were to make his Observations upon them, and proceed to argue, that such People have no better an Opinion of religious Obligations than himself; think upon Christian Duties

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with no more Pleasure and Satisfaction than he; and have just as much of the Spirit of Christ in them as he, and no more; tho' they profess to believe the Apostle in that ^{Rom. viii. 9.} Saying, *If any Man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his;* I do not see how the grievous Charge upon them could well be confuted.

I mention this entire Abstinence from religious Subjects in Conversation, (practis'd, without doubt, by too many amongst us) not as a real, but a falsely reputed Branch of Christian Liberty. As though the Clergy only were bound in Duty to handle them, as well out of the Pulpit, as in it. But, be that as it will, it is certainly a necessary Consequence in Nature, that the gross fashionable Neglect of them, must of course, by degrees, abate Men's Esteem of them; and give very great countenance besides to the reigning Licentiousness of the Age we live in.

I F only these ill Effects have naturally resulted from People's Backwardness to introduce or admit religious and pious Subjects of Discourse into their ordinary Conversations

versations with each other, any one of them is sufficient to prove the Liberty of omitting them, at least an accidental Evil; an Evil of such Importance, as ought, undoubtedly, to be reform'd.

I shall just mention one other Misapplication, of what we commonly esteem justifiable Liberty, and conclude this Head.

AND that is the imprudent Freedom, which too many Persons do certainly take, of saying or doing any thing within the Walls of their own private Families, which they esteem, and perhaps very truly, to be in its own nature lawful, as being free from Turpitude, or other apparent Immorality.

I leave it to every one's own Discretion, and recommend it as a Matter well worthy your most serious Consideration, to distinguish the different Tempers and Degrees of Sense and Understanding in the Persons you have about you, in your respective Capacities; and not to think it a perfectly indifferent Matter before whom you act or speak the same things, so you neither do, nor say any thing which you believe to be justly chargeable with Vice or Immorality: It behoves

you

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you to consider and avoid as well the Similitude of Vice, as its Reality ; and to remember how much apter some People are than others to misinterpret the innocent Freedoms of their Superiors, and wrest them into Authorities for Licentiousness in themselves.

III. I go on, in the last Place, to shew for what Reasons and Considerations we ought to be thus cautious in the Exercise of our Christian Liberty.

THE first Reason that occurs, is this, That whosoever gives the Occasion to others either of their falling into Sin, or of strengthening and confirming themselves in the Practice of it, however undesignedly and thoughtlessly he does it, he is really doing the Devil Service by it, and forwarding his wicked Will and Interest amongst Men. We all know that the Devil's great Aim and Endeavour in this World, is to destroy as many Human Souls as he can ; that is, to draw them into the Commission of as many great Wickednesses here, as shall be sure, by the just Judgment of God, to cause their

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Damnation hereafter. So that no Man can do him a greater Pleasure in this World, than by contributing to his Assistance in this Employment, and helping to draw on and ensnare others into the direct Road of eternal Misery. But surely, if there be any Being in Nature, whose Service we would be thought the most to abhor, if it were only upon the account of the Vileness of such a Master; if there be any one whose Pleasure we would the least willingly promote, as knowing that it is impossible for him ever to aim at any thing that is either honourable or just, the Devil is certainly that Being; whom we ought indeed to be so far from designing to please in any thing, that we ought rather, if we find that we have at any time done it, but by chance only, and through meer Human Infirmity, to be truly griev'd for it; but if at any time willingly, then not only to grieve, but even to abhor our selves for it, as having thereby justly offended God; and withal, acted a most vile and ungrateful Part towards our good and gracious Redeemer the Lord Christ Jesus.

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AND is there no Force in these Considerations, to make us willing and resolv'd sometimes to restrain our selves in the Use of our most innocent and pleasing Liberty, for the sake of our weaker Brethren, who may, likely, be prejudic'd in their spiritual Welfare, if we do not? God forbid that we should make it so light a matter to pleasure the Devil, and promote his wicked Will against God and Men, as to chuse rather to do it, than not to pleasure our selves in the Exercise of any Freedoms which we know are not particularly forbidden by the express Word of God. But, *2dly*, Supposing there were no great Force of Argument in the foregoing Consideration, without adding thereto, the imminent Danger which we our selves are drawn into, when they are misled and ensnar'd into Sin by our Liberty; this, however, should prevail with us as Men, as partaking of the same common Nature one with another. Can we be easy under the Thought of ensnaring our Fellow-Creatures into the imminent Danger of endless and eternal Misery? Can we be so indifferent about such

their Welfare in the World to come, as not to value how much we endanger it by such an Use of our Liberty, as we believe is too innocent in it self to endanger our own? This is plainly such a want of Love for our Brethren, as is not only unchristian, but downright inhuman and brutish. He that would not forego a present Gratification, or lay aside a present Diversion, nay, and be content to undergo some present Pains and Trouble to serve his Friend in an Affair of some Consequence upon a sudden Call, would be thought not only not to deserve the Name of a Friend, but even scarcely qualify'd for Human Society; either too ill-natur'd, or too much addicted to his Pleasures, to perform the social Duties of Life, or consequently to deserve the Benefit of them from others. And why then do we not make the same Judgment concerning Spiritual Welfare, as concerning Temporal? Why should we not for that infinitely greater Interest of Men, be content upon a present proper Occasion, either wholly to forbear doing what we are satisfied hath no Harm in it self, but would

very likely prove a Snare to another, if it were done; or at least to take so much Precaution about the Manner of it, as may probably suffice to prevent any prejudicial Consequences from it?

BUT, *3dly* and *lastly*, Every Man's own particular and personal Interest is so nearly concern'd in the Matter, that if there be any one upon whom this Consideration will not prevail, it can't be for want of Strength in the Argument to persuade, but for want either of Understanding or Will to see his own Danger. Innumerable are the Texts of Scripture exhorting us to Charity and unfeigned Love of the Brethren. Our Blessed Saviour himself has said expresly, *This is my Commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you.* How he loved us, we know very well, in that he laid down his Life for us. And the Apostle assures us, that we our selves ought even to lay down our Lives for the Brethren.

AND if the Object about which this Duty is conversant, is, by the Apostle's Direction, to take in the whole Compass of Mankind; let

us do Good to all Men, to all of the same common Name and Nature with our selves, nay, even to those who, of all others, seem to have the least Pretensions to our Favour ; to our very Enemies and Persecutors.

SURELY the Obligation to the Performance of this Duty must rise still higher, and more nearly affect us, when our Nature, our Religion, and our Country, call upon us ; when the Necessities of our Blood and Kindred plead for Pity and Compassion at our hands, and do in a peculiar manner challenge the Preference to our tender Care and Regard for them.

THE Charity, Kindness, and Benevolence which we express to our Countrymen, may justly be esteem'd a Tribute due to the Place of our Nativity ; and which we may, with good Reason, imagine, will be accepted of God Almighty, as a pious and grateful Acknowledgment due to him, as he is the Fountain and Author of our Being.

THOSE who are now Objects of your Charity, may in time become eminent Instances and Examples of it to others ;

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may become famous, useful, and serviceable in their Generations; and by this means, will be able, in return to your Benefactions, to entail the antient Dignity, Renown, and Splendor of the *British* Nation upon their latest Posterity.

THESE are some of the many Happy Advantages which you may expect to reap from a religious and due Observance of this Day's Solemnity. Let not then any indecent or irreverend Behaviour be seen amongst us, let no Prophaneness or Immorality, no Intemperance or Luxury unhappily pervert the pious End of this Day's Assembly, and give occasion that our *Good be evil spoken of.*

EVERY individual Member of this Society, has a manifold Obligation upon him to look to his own Conduct and Behaviour, in regard to these Particulars.

HE owes this Care to himself, as he would avoid the Peril of committing grievous Offences against God.

HE owes it to the Fellowship of this Antient Society, which he professes himself a Member of, lest his private Miscarriage and

and ill Behaviour give occasion for Reproach and Scandal to be cast on the Community.

He owes this Care to the pious Esteem and Veneration which every True *Briton* ought with Thankfulness to acknowledge to be due to the Memory and pious Example of his departed Saint and Bishop of his Country.

LASTLY, and in a word, He owes this Regard to the great Name of that most Excellent PRINCESS, to whose Honour this Feast is dedicated; he owes it to her Illustrious Consort, who courteously condescends to stile himself the PRESIDENT of this Honourable Society; and in an especial manner do we all owe it to our most Gracious and Royal Sovereign, the Guardian and Protector of our Lives, our Laws and Liberties.

IT is our Lot, and the peculiar Happiness of our Constitution (blessed be God for it) to live under a Government, which gives us the utmost Assurance, that Words can be made to signify, of the Protection of

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of our Sacred and Civil Rights and Privileges, as they stand to this Day establish'd by Law. And so long as the Power of their Preservation is fixed in the Hands of those who are Friends to both, we are sure that the Ill-will alone of our Enemies can affect them with no real Danger. But then we are full as sure, that God, in his Providence, may weaken the Arms of our strongest and most willing Protectors, if our Iniquities, our Divisions, and uncharitable Animosities prevail against us to make Him our Adversary.

To prevent which fatal Consequence, let me entreat you all here present to join with me in the Words of that excellent Collect of our Church, which teaches us thus to pray for the Gift of Charity :

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our Doings without Charity are nothing worth; send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our Hearts, that most excellent Gift of Charity, (the very Bond of Peace, and of all

all Vertues, without which whosoever liveth, is counted dead before thee.) Grant this for thine only Son Christ Jesus his sake: To whom, with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, Three Persons and One God, be ascrib'd, as is most due, all Praise and Glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

F I N I S.



to Christian Conrad.



